DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 540 EA 016 992

AUTHOR Barth, Roland S.
TITLE The Principals' Center at Harvard University.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Catholic Educational Association (81st, Boston, MA, April 23-26, 1984).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *Enrichment Activities; Environmental Influences; *Leadership Training; *Learning Activities; *Management Development; *Principals; Professional Development
IDENTIFIERS Principals Centers

ABSTRACT

By promoting insight-sharing among members, Harvard's Principals' Center works to develop, personally and professionally, those influencing the quality of schools. Growing numbers of principals outside Massachusetts, having attended the center as visiting practitioners, are founding centers in their own areas; the Harvard center itself is creating a national network of centers to strenthen individual development attempts. Additionally, the center is contributing to the little known area of leadership characteristics. Among its findings are these: (1) that principals are seen and see themselves as leaders, not learners; and (2) that nonprincipals identify the skills they believe effective principals should possess. The center is striving to alter both concepts by helping principals to reflect upon and analyze their work in order to understand better their own styles and schools. Conditions associated with enrichment seem to include recognition, voluntary participation, a protected setting, participant diversity, principal-centered programs, knowledge sharing, and varied activities for various learning styles. Yet the center faces dilemmas, among them the question of individualizing an organization with over 5,000 members. Finally, the center is important because it legitimizes the idea that there are conditions under which practitioners will voluntarily engage in activities promoting leadership growth and thus school improvement. (KS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED246540

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Roland S. Barth

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

THE PRINCIPALS' CENTER AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Roland S. Barth

Harvard University, MA

EA 016 992

The Principals' Center at Harvard University

Roland S. Barth

It's easier now to describe what the Principals' Center is than it was three years ago to try and describe what the Principals' Center "will be." The Principals' Center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education is a membership organization dedicated to the personal and professional development of school principals and that of the many others--teachers, counselors, department chairpersons, housemasters and sometimes parents--who influence the character and quality of a school. Participation is voluntary, open to any person who supports the purposes of the Center and who pays a fee of $120 per year ($80 per year if all the principals within a particular system join and $50 for out-of-state members). The Center is committed to school improvement from within. By replenishing the lives of school people we believe the school experiences of their students will be enriched.

The Principals' Center is a place where school practitioners play a major role in their own development, just as they play a major role in the development of the schools which they serve. School people carry around with them extraordinary insights in areas such as leadership, curriculum, staff development, child psychology, and parent involvement, which are seldom explicit for them, let alone accessible to others. A major purpose of the Center is to reveal this abundance of thinking and practice, so it can be more widely available to improve schools.

ED 016 992

To effectively use the principalship as a vehicle for school improvement principals also need external support systems--support from other principals, from the central office, from universities and professional organizations. The Principals' Center is finding a number of ways to support principals so they may better pursue their own goals as educational leaders. An advisory board of 18 Boston area principals and four Harvard faculty members determines the program of the Center, making decisions about themes, formats, and resource persons. Workshops are held two or three times each week around themes such as "The Principal's Role in Teacher Supervision and Evaluation," or "Addressing Issues of Diversity in Schools." Expertise for these sessions is drawn from our membership and the advisory board, as well as from the university community and from outside consultants. The Center publishes a regular newsletter to which school leaders are major contributors. Some 2000 educators have requested to be on the mailing list. The Center also offers members access to the School of Education library and runs a program to encourage principals to write about their work.

A growing number of principals from outside Massachusetts have served as "visiting practitioners" at the Principals' Center for periods ranging from eight weeks to a full year, contributing their skills to the staff and providing resources for colleagues while they reflect and write about their professional experience. Some of these school leaders--from New Orleans, Connecticut and Illinois--have begun to establish

centers for principals in their own regions. Through a grant from the Babcock Foundation, the Principals' Center is collaborating with the North Carolina Institute for Principals in a program which exchanges ideas, resource personnel, and principals. An additional activity of the Center this year is the creation of a national network of principal centers to help link and strengthen isolated attempts to promote the professional development of school principals. We are preparing a newsletter, conference, and directory of centers. Last summer a ten day institute on "the Principal and Effective Schools" was held at Harvard for 105 school leaders from twenty-five states and a similar institute on the "Principal and School Improvement" is being planned by the Principals' Center for the summer of 1984.

These many activities support that the Principals' Center is becoming an organization which attempts to improve the quality of life and learning in schools by encouraging different ways of thinking about common problems; by transforming school problems into opportunities for school improvement; by encouraging clarification of assumptions guiding practice; by offering opportunities for shared problem-solving and reflection; and by providing a context of mutual support and trust in which personal relationships may be established and developed.

Research is confirming once again what teachers, students, parents, and superintendents have long observed: the individual school is the critical unit for educational improvement, and within the school the principal has a powerful influence upon the nature of the school, the conditions under which youngsters and adults learn, and upon what and how much they learn. Yet

for all the agreement about the central role of the principal, there is surprisingly little accumulated knowledge concerning the characteristics of principals associated with effective leadership and with pupil accomplishment let alone insight about how these characteristics might be developed. We are attempting to provide a forum to contribute to that knowledge base.

What are we finding? We are finding that operating a principals' center engages us with other organizations committed to the professional growth of school leaders. Two conceptions seem to dominate the current landscape: one is a belief, especially among national professional organizations, state principals' groups, and local principals' associations, that principals should decide what kinds of assistance they want and need--if any. A problem of relying upon this "free market" approach is that many principals do not seriously engage in helpful, sustained activities which might improve their work. By and large, principals are seen--and see themselves--as leaders, not learners, as staff developers, not staff developees.

A second conception about principals' development is characterized by the identification by non-principals of essential skills or knowledge which it is believed principals should have in order to run effective schools. "If only principals will _____ they will run better schools." This is a deficiency model of adult growth in which principals are seen and see themselves as the objects of training activities devised and supplied by others. Whether these attempts to transform principals emanate from the central office,

or from state departments of education, principals' participation in them is often compulsory, often accompanied by resistance, and not often followed by lasting gains.

We are finding a need for new conceptions of principals' development. The Principals' Center is interested in what principals want to know and do, and we are interested in what others think principals should be able to know and do. But we are asking a different question: "Under what conditions are principals likely to become active learners so they may develop the skills which will assist them in fulfilling their important place as moral and instructional leaders in their schools?" Our logic is not complicated: if we can devise ways to help principals reflect thoughtfully and systematically upon the work they do, analyze that work, translate their thinking into spoken and written articulation, and engage in conversations with others about that work, they will better understand their complex schools, the tasks confronting them, and their own styles as leaders. Understanding practice is the single most important precondition for improving practice.

When I was a principal there were many in the school community who questioned whether I was educable--teachers, parents, students, the central office and sometimes even other principals! I always thought I <u>was</u> educable--if only the conditions were right. They seldom were. In a way the Principals' Center is a continuing search for these conditions. We are finding several which appear to be associated with the professional invigoration of school principals:

PREPROFESSIONAL RECOGNITION Despite the good rhetoric about the central importance of school principals offered in the effective schools research and in current national reports we find that few principals feel valued or recognized in their work. Yet, of all the pressing needs of public school practitioners, none is more vital than the need for personal and professional recognition from a society which values the product of education far more than it values those who are committed to providing it. This is a matter of great concern because the self-esteem of principals, like that of other learners, appear to be strongly related to their capacity to learn. The concept of a principals' center seems to provide considerable recognition for principals.

VOLUNTARY ATTENDANCE Initially many superintendents offered to support the participation of their principals if they could decide which principals to send and for what sort of "remediation". Similarly, PTA groups offered to send their principals if we would promise to "fix" them. We have resisted these offers, as much as they might have contributed to our membership and budget. By placing the decision about participation squarely on principals' shoulders, indeed, by making it difficult through the cost of time and annual fees, we find that those who participate want to participate. Most activities are refreshingly free of back row cynics and critics. With the choice to attend comes an openness to learning.

PROTECTED SETTING There is a great deal to learn using the school house as locus and context. But we are finding that members prefer a more neutral, protected university setting for their reflections and conversations--a place where a secretary is not likely to intrude with a worried look and message in hand. We're finding that a university-based center can provide a contemplative place in the ivory tower for school people as well as academics.

MAXIMIZING DIVERSITY The education business seems to thrive as a sorting enterprise, always attempting to narrow the range of human characteristics represented in a group--in the best interests of both instructors and those instructed. The Center, has deliberately tilted in the other direction--towards heterogenity rather than homogenity and thereby has come to occupy a rather unique place in the experience of principals. Currently members bring with them extraordinary variety and background of ideas and experiences from elementary, middle, high schools, urban, rural, suburban, public, private and parochial schools. We see seated around the same table teachers, parents, superintendents as well as beginning and experienced principals, university students and faculty. We are finding that expanding the range of participants also expands the universe of possible solutions to common problems. This seems to generate a remarkable cross-fertilization of ideas.

PRINCIPAL-CENTERED PROGRAMS We're finding through the mechanism of a program advisory board that principals are quite ready and able to identify areas in which they would like to learn.

Whether it's "the use of new technologies in schools" or "the supervision of teachers" principals decision about program and about formats for addressing them have been inventive and enthusiastic. "Ownership" of program by principals seems to be a sine non quo of the principals center.

PRINCIPALS AS RESOURCES In our attempts to involve principals as givers as well as receivers of ideas, services, and skills, we are finding that the process of being helpful to others is one of the most powerful ways of generating respect and recognition--both for oneself and for those one helps. Being asked to share ideas and experiences with colleagues--being paid an honorarium to do so--can counter the taboo amoung educators against sharing their craft knowledge. Sharing what you know is also, of course, a rich occasion for reflection about practice and finding order and meaning in what is too often very chaotic-appearing practice.

AN ARRAY OF FORMATS Too many attempts at professional development for principals are attempts at group growth. All the principals in a district, for instance, receive inservice on PBBS on Thursday afternoon. The assumption is they all need these skills before Thursday and will all have them after Thursday. We're finding that principals, like other learners, have preferred learning styles, different attention spans, interests, and needs. Consequently we attempt to vary activities along several important dimensions: e.g. those led by principals, Harvard faculty, graduate students, and outside consultants; long term (a series on the principal as staff developer) and short term

a one shot talk on Magatrends; small groups, large groups, and individual participation; low risk activities (large group addresses), modest risk (small group discussions) and high risk (writing groups, pairing to exchange school visits). Principals can match their styles as practitioners and as learners to these different formats. In the process many are learning something about themselves as learners as well as new content and skills.

These then are some of the conditions we are finding seem to be associated with the successful personal and professional growth of school principals. It is significant that most of these building blocks were set in place four years ago by a group of twenty-eight Boston areas principals who served as architects and engineers during the planning of the Center. In many ways these conditions are obvious to students of staff development and adult growth. Obvious perhaps, but suprisingly uncommon in the lives of most principals and in the halls of most universities.

The Principals' Center is prompting the faculty and staff working at the Center, as well as the members, to discover a great deal about ourselves and the business in which we hope to become better. As an organization, the Center is making a transition from problems of planning, creation, and first approximations to current problems of growth and expansion, on the one hand, and refinement of purpose, means, and knowledge of effects on the other. The issues with which we are now grappling constitute a weighty agenda. Let me mention a few of the dilemmas which now occupy us:

How much "ownership" are principals willing and able to take for the Center? Fund raising? Policy questions: Design of program? Participation as resources? Licking stamps and mailing newsletters?

How can Harvard students and faculty become more involved without losing principals' ownership of program and policy?

To what extent does and should the Center offer what principals "want" rather than what others think they "need"?

What is the distinction between principals' sharing their craft knowledge and principals telling war stories? How can the latter be transformed into the former?

Should more activities be held out in the schools as well as at the University? Should we focus on one shot events or move towards more coherent series of events?

Should membership be open only to principals or to anyone who wants to join? Should a limit be placed on the number of members? What is optimal? Should we work to include more school leaders from independent and parochial schools?

Should we offer academic credit for members who participate. Should we consider other forms of extrinsic rewards?

How might we and should we attempt to involve the "bottom ability level" of school principals, not so quick to participate?

How can we individualize an organization with over 5000 members?

How should we respond to requests to "franchise" the principals' center idea? Is there a "Harvard model"?

How can principals' involvement in their own development become energy-generating as well as energy-depleting?

How can we evaluate the success of the Principals' Center?

There are no answers to these questions which are obvious or simple, particularly when we keep in mind our pluralistic constituency: principals, university administration, faculty, and graduate students, each of which has quite different purposes for the center. Yet how we respond to each of these questions will effect the character, quality, and next evolution of the Principals' Center.

Finally, we are finding the Principals' Center may be important for many reasons: for the links with school practice it is helping to reestablish for students and faculty at Harvard; because it is bringing to the attention of 500 members the possibility of designing and actively engaging in their own professional development; because it is helping to assemble in the Boston areaa community of school leaders with a shared sense of purpose for whom the bonds of generic issues are beginning to transcend professional chasms; because it is validating, dignifying, and supporting a profession laboring under both diminished public confidence and diminished self-confidence; because it is contributing to the efforts of others in the United States in considering anew the professional development of principals as a means of strengthening schools. And, perhaps above all, the Principals' Center is important because it offers an example which legitimizes an idea--that there <u>are</u> conditions under which school practitioners will voluntarily engage in activities which promote their growth as leaders in school improvement. We are telegraphing the vital message that principals can become learners and <u>thereby</u> leaders in their schools.

We often ask ourselves whether the Principals' Center is, in fact, improving schools and having a demonstrable influence upon pupils. What difference does it make to the life and learning of a fourth grader in the Watertown Public Schools that her principal participates in the Harvard Principals' Center two or three times a month? The research design which might answer this question boggles the mind. Like most staff development attempts we can offer little evidence at this time which directly relates members' participation in the Center with outcomes in their schools such as pupil achievement. But that's not the whole waterfront. We can say with some certainty that principals are voluntarily joining the Center, attending in large numbers the different activities, reporting enthusiasm for what they experience and learn, carrying these conversations back to their schools and systems, and establishing and sustaining their own professional networks. After three years we continue to believe that fostering this climate of reflection, learning and cooperation among educators outside their schools will inevitably strengthen reflection, learning and cooperation among adults and students within their schools.

Roland S. Barth, for many years a public school principal, was responsible for establishing a Principals' Center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1981. He is now Co-director of the Center and Senior Lecturer on Education at Harvard University. He is the author of numerous articles and of Run School Run and Open Education and the American School.